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ABSTRACT

Research in education has not been relevant because: 1) Decision makers have been making decisions without research findings and see no need for this kind of information now; 2) Research findings in the local schools are usually made available to the decision-maker or administrator after the decisions have been implemented; 3) Researchers feel the need to replicate findings before making them known. Several suggestions are made for making research findings available in a form and at times when they can be used by the local decision-maker. Dissemination of information which requires change in curriculum, administration, or methods will be resisted by those in power. Models which will provide information of process as well as product evaluation data are suggested as alternatives which will provide data more quickly, and provide partial replication before decisions are made. (Author/AG)

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Abstract

Let's Make Research More Relevant

Some of the reasons that research in education has not been relevant are: 1. Decision makers have been making decisions without research findings and see no need for this kind of information now; 2. Research findings in the local schools are usually made available to the decision-maker or administrator after the decisions have been implemented; 3. Researchers feel the need to replicate findings before making them known.

Several suggestions are made for making research findings available in a form and at times when they can be used by the local decision-maker. First, the technical reports must be translated into simpler language which can be easily and quickly read by busy decision-makers. Second, testing dates may have to be changed so that test results will be available for analysis before the decisions are made; Third, the researcher will have to become more knowledgeable about the politics of new knowledge.

Dissemination of information which requires change in curriculum, administration, or methods will be resisted by those in power. Models which will provide information of process as well as product evaluation data are suggested as alternatives which will provide data more quickly, and provide partial replication before decisions are made.

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Let's Make Research More Relevant

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The discrepancy between research findings and decisions made by local school boards and school administrators makes most of the educational research being done meaningless in terms of implementation by local school districts. That this problem is true at other levels of government is indicated by the report made by Dr. Dershimer in the April 1971 Educational Researcher. He refers to "practitioners at the federal, state, and local levels who are key in shaping or reshaping major educational policies", and says:

> At present these policy influencers seldom consult researchers to determine how the findings of key studies could influence policies. In turn, it has also become evident that researchers much listen more closely to the problems and concerns of the practitioners in order to better understand what needs to be studied to improve the system.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the latter issue; that is, as researchers, we must learn to listen and be responsive to the concerns and problems of the decision-makers, and use our understanding of the decision-making process better in order to really influence the decisions made in educational circles today. I would like to pose three factors which contribute to the problem:

1. Decision makers have been making decisions without research findings for so long that they see no need for using this kind of information now. After all, the schools have been opening each fall and operating each year without such information, and everyone knows that he is an "expert" when it comes to educational matters anyway.

2. Research findings are generally made available to the decision-maker or administrator long after the decisions which required this information have been implemented.

3. Researchers are prone to want to corroborate their findings thoroughly before they publish them or make them known to decision makers, a most desireable attribute but one which needs to be explored.

It has been a practice of researchers in the past to blame the decision maker for not using the "good" results of evaluation in making decisions. As Dershimer indicated, this blaming the administrator indiscriminately may be more of a problem which the researcher should address than the administrator. This poses some problems in terms of the kind of training which has been provided most researchers in education. First, the researcher has been trained in a highly technical area in most instances (Yamamoto, 1968). The Title IV trainees, for example, have been given extensive training in the use of computers, advanced statistical techniques, and experimental design, but very little training in the politics of disseminating the information they obtain. Another problem involved in the Title IV training program is that most of these graduates are found in teaching positions rather than working in research offices so that the pattern of their training will be repeated in the students whom they teach.

Second, while it is true that research in education has been shorted in terms of money allocated for it (Wynne, 1970), it is also true that researchers have done little to provide answers to questions asked by the administrators at decision making time. One reason for this is that the

testing programs upon which most of the summative evaluation of new programs in the schools is based are given in May of each year, and by the time the results have been compiled, reports written, and the information disseminated, the decisions have long since been made regarding the planning for the new school year. This planning for a new school year is usually scheduled for February or March in order that the necessary materials, personnel, and other administrative details for beginning a new school year can be obtained and distributed. This timing is essential for the local school district to operate, and only if research results are available at decision making time will they be utilized.

Third, many researchers see the production of summative data by March as an impossibility since the test data upon which much research information depends is not collected until May. This time schedule in most school districts throughout the nation is almost inflexible. But must we always test in May? Why not change the testing dates to January? Granted, the first year or so that the new testing program was installed, some extrapolation or interpretation of test data would have to be made. After a year, however, this could be used as a baseline, and there would be no reason for waiting until the end of the year to do the comprehensive testing. In addition if the testing were done at mid-year, the results could be made available to the teacher so that she could alter her teaching program if certain areas of weakness were shown to exist where he had assumed her children were proficient. This procedure would

also permit the data for analyzing the research programs in the district, which might bring about change in curriculum or program, to be available at the time when decisions regarding funding of such programs were being considered.

Cohen (1970) has indicated that recent commentators, including Stufflebeam and Guba, have pointed out that evaluation of projects in the schools is potentially relevant to decision-making. The researcher should be aware of the political implications of his findings, and the fact that the politics of a situation may make his findings of lesser importance than some other factors in implementing programs. Those trained to work in local school districts or state or federal agencies must be aware that many of the decisions which are made, not only in regard to program implementation and resource allocation, but also in the evaluation itself, are judgmental in nature (Stake, 1970).

In this sense the discrepancy model for evaluating on-going programs has much merit (Provus, 1970). The researcher or evaluator recognizes that he provides information which may or may not be influential in making the final decision. Since it is a vital part of the discrepancy model of evaluation, the use of process data to both evaluate programs and corroborate previous findings should be emphasized. That is, a program may be instituted in a school system, carried out for a year and a report based on summative data presented to the Board of Education or Administration in August or September. By this time, the report will have little or no effect on the program for that

school year, but a careful monitoring of the program during the fall of that year, using process data which can be compared to that collected the previous year could be used as corraborating evidence that the program should be continued or discontinued. If the evidence is substantial that the program is progressing as well as it had the previous year, and if the previous year's results indicated that the program was effective, then the recommendation would be made to continue the program. If the data had shown the program to be largely ineffective in accomplishing its goals the previous year, and the process data indicated that the same kinds of results could be expected during the coming year, this data could be used to recommend that the program be dropped or at least modified in a significant way the following year. There are, of course, many other possibilities for recommendations, but these should suffice for our purposes.

Once the decision makers become habituated to receiving this kind of data, they will request that new programs have evaluation designs built into them, and pilot studies can be conducted which will provide information based on small samples and short periods of time to give some indication of the usefulness of the projects. Here, less rigorous probability levels would probably be used, and much more judgmental kinds of inferences made, subject to more rigorous follow-up studies.

It is surprising to many people to learn that the

voluminous reports which they write are actually read by people at the state and national levels. As I was reviewing one report submitted to the Bureau of Professional Development this past year, I noted a discrepancy and called the local researcher. His surprised response was, "I never thought that anyone ever read them so I didn't check them carefully". This kind of attitude has developed in many evaluators since much of the information required by state and federal agencies in particular has not provided feedback to them in terms of their programs' effectiveness. In many cases the kind of evaluation requested has been purely of a descriptive nature, and could not be used to determine program effectiveness in any case. As we hear more and more about accountability, the research reports generated by local, state, and federal agencies charged with evaluative responsibilities will be in greater and greater demand, however, and the purely descriptive kinds of reports will be replaced by more thorough reporting using the best kinds of evaluative techniques possible.

A factor which will affect the degree of sophistication and care with which projects are carried out and evaluated is the monitoring function. By a carefully scheduled monitoring of projects, administrators and project directors will be made more and more aware of the importance of performing the kinds of duties which have been prescribed in the proposals which they have submitted, or performing the duties required of a particular kind of curricular innovation.

This monitoring process until recent years has not been an integral part of most locally conducted evaluation processes, and much of the data collected has not reflected truly the kinds of programs for which data was collected. In other words, the program which was described initially was never really implemented, but data were collected after a prescribed period of time which purportedly measured that program. Such loose evaluations have created many of the discrepancies in findings which are reported in educational research literature.

Another facet of this problem is that frequently the research office is called in to evaluate a program after it has been completed (Theimer, 1970). To stop this kind of request from coming from administrators who are frequently trying to simply get data to support their own position or current practice, researchers will have to build the habit of thinking in terms of research in the minds of the decision makers at all levels (Powers, 1970). In order to accomplish this goal, researchers will have to learn the skills needed to communicate with those for whom they are gathering their information. At present, this poses no small problems (Robertson, 1970, Cohen, 1971). The fact that most of us feel that we must write very technical reports in order to impress our peers works to our discredit when we try to relay our findings to laymen, school boards or other educators. Our expertness has set us apart, and made us less able to communicate in simple language with this group of people.

The problems which beset us as educational researchers are those which must be addressed by us. Ed Wynne (1971) feels very pessimistic about ever effecting change through school administrators, and suggests that we need to be addressing a new constituency. Provus (1970) has devised a model which does work in a local school district. I think we must continue to work with both groups based on my experiences in Denver and Philadelphia.

The research department of the Philadelphia Public Schools, largely ignored in any decision making process for years, has become an increasingly important group involved in the planning for change in the schools. This change came about because (1) the department originally undertook to do post hoc studies, although they realized the limitations of them. Each time they were asked to perform one of these activities, however, they carefully explained that they should be involved in the planning process from the beginning, and that their findings were not as good as they could be if they were involved at the beginning of a project. The message finally got through, and within three years after the reorganization of the Office of Research and Evaluation, superintendents were asking for reports on special projects as they planned their budgets for the succeeding year; (2) the reports were presented in simple language, with back-up reports of a technical nature available to support any statement made in the simplified reports; and (3) careful attention was paid to both the monitoring of the projects and the reporting of data which was as valid and reliable as it was

possible to obtain in an applied situation. This change did not occur because the Research Department waited for the administration to ask them for information. It came about when we said that the data we had collected should be at least presented before decisions were made regarding reallocation of funds.

As Wynne (1970) and Cohen (1971) so eloquently point out, however, good information poses a real threat to those who are and have been working in a totally political realm. In that area knowledge is dangerous, and great skill must be employed in presenting data in such a way that implementation of results can be accomplished with the least threat to those in power. Where the information demands that major changes in the power structure be made, such changes will have to be made only after concerted effort of a political nature. Even the changing of the time of testing in a school system arouses the suspicions of many people; to suggest major changes in organization or curriculum will certainly bring out many defensive mechanisms.

I have suggested some of the problems which have made educational research irrelevant as far as implementation of new findings in the schools are concerned. I have also suggested some changes which might help to break through the bottleneck which keeps the schools operating several years behind the knowledge we now have regarding good educational practices. To the extent that we can begin to communicate our results in understandable language and at appropriate times, our work will be effectively incorporated in the schools systems of our nation.

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